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EQUAL SUFFRAGE—A PROBLEM OF POLITICAL JUSTICE

BY ANNA HOWARD SHAW,

President, National American Woman Suffrage Association.

The franchise has been granted to women on equal terms with men in nine states of the United States and one territory, namely, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Washington, California, Kansas, Arizona, Oregon and Alaska. Everyone of the equal suffrage states is adjacent to one or more of the other suffrage states. Moreover, five of the states where equal suffrage amendments will be submitted to the voters in November border on one or more equal suffrage states. Surely no state would enfranchise its women, or would even seriously consider it, if equal suffrage had proved a failure just across the boundary line. Therefore, this geographical argument, as we suffragists call it, seems to us the very best one which can be urged as to the practical success of votes for women, proving, as it does, that the anti-suffrage bogies which make some impression in the East are merely ridiculous in the West where evil prophecies have given way before experience, and opinions are based on evidence, not on idle prejudice.

A similar practical demonstration of the results of equal suffrage has been made in Europe. For instance, in Norway tax-paying women were granted the municipal franchise in 1901, and the full franchise in 1907. In 1910 the municipal franchise was granted to all women, the full parliamentary franchise being extended to all women in 1913. If the Norwegian women had made a failure of their municipal suffrage, it is obvious that the parliamentary suffrage would not have been given them. If the tax-paying women had failed to demonstrate their patriotism and common sense, the non-tax-paying women would have failed to secure the franchise. The experience of Finland, whose women have had full suffrage since 1906, has been similar to that of Norway. Iceland, Denmark and Sweden are said to be on the verge of granting full suffrage to women after a reasonably long test of municipal suffrage. One after another the states of the Australian federation granted the full franchise to women, the last state being Victoria in 1908. There again each

state, except the first, had the advantage of knowing the results of the experiment in the neighboring states, and in New Zealand.

These facts, demonstrating satisfaction with equal suffrage wherever it has been tried, together with the mass of favorable evidence which has been presented to the public through the impartial columns of our newspapers and magazines, would seem to make it unnecessary to discuss votes for women from the standpoint of expediency, even if one believed that a fundamental principle should be affected by questions of expediency.

I personally am convinced that the enfranchisement of women should be considered from the standpoint of justice and logic alone.

Our demand is suffrage for women on the same terms as for men. Let us see just what this means. The men of this country have established and maintained what they call a democracy. The basic idea of a democracy is, they say, that it shall be a government of the people, by the people, for the people. So far, so good. But "people" has been translated to mean male citizens only. We ask, therefore, not that the established principle of government be changed but that it shall be held to apply to women citizens as well as to men citizens.

In general, every male citizen of the United States, native born or naturalized, is entitled to vote, if he is 21 years of age and has been for a certain length of time a resident of the state and county where he desires to cast his ballot. Idiots and criminals are generally disfranchised. In some states there is a slight educational qualification—the ability to read and understand the constitution—and in a very few states a small property qualification. On the other hand, there are some states where an alien is entitled to vote as soon as he announces his intention to become a citizen. But, with the exception of the provisions as to idiots, none of the causes for disfranchisement is such that a man can not overcome it or prevent it. He is not arbitrarily and irrevocably disfranchised, as women are simply because of their sex.

Occasionally, one hears a man say that the "ignorant men," or "the foreign-born men," or "the men of the lower classes" should not be allowed to vote, but no one makes any serious suggestion or prophecy of changing the form of government. Those who are dissatisfied with the present system apparently realize the futility of trying to take the franchise away from any class which has it, for,

although the men of the present day do not stop to consider why they themselves vote, and seldom recall, except to quote at political meetings, the sentiments which stirred our forefathers—"Taxation without representation is tyranny;" "A just government rests upon the consent of the governed;" "No man is good enough to govern another without that man's consent"—yet every man knows at heart that he could not be self-respecting if he were deprived of the ballot. He knows that whether the franchise is a right or a privilege, every citizen must have it in order to be free, since economic independence, intellectual independence, even spiritual independence can not exist without political freedom as a foundation.

Therefore, the question is not whether men should have a democratic form of government. They have already proved that it is the kind of government they want and the kind they intend to have, even though they make grievous mistakes in trying to live up to their ideals as to what a democracy should be. Nor is it pertinent to discuss whether the voter should meet certain educational, moral or property tests, because our only demand is that those tests be the same for men as for women. The question is, why should women, as women, be disfranchised? Or, in other words, why should women not have the ballot on the same terms as men, no matter what these terms are now or what they may be in the future?

There is no reason why they should not have it. If there were a reason, our opponents would have discovered it long ago. The fact that there is no reason explains why there is so much discussion of woman suffrage—discussion which plays all around the subject, but seldom hits it squarely. Our opponents are continually bringing forward excuses and evasions, which they hope will be mistaken for reasons, but we can seldom persuade them to limit the discussion to the merits of our equal suffrage contention.

For example, they claim that all or the majority of women do not want the vote, or that the women already enfranchised have not always used their political power in such a way as to please every one, or that the women who want the vote should be able to tell before they have it what they will do with it. I contend that we should not answer our opponents when they argue along these lines, because facts as to the results of equal suffrage, or the number of women who want suffrage, or the reason they ought to want it, have no bearing on our question.

Imagine saying to a man of 21, before allowing him to register for the first time:

You must prove satisfactorily to a majority of your fellow citizens that a majority of the men who are 21, or will become 21, want the ballot; that all the men already enfranchised vote at every election and vote intelligently on all questions; that you, yourself, will use your ballot for useful reforms only, and that you, as well as other men to be enfranchised in the future, can not accomplish the same results without the vote; finally, that you and all future voters will not neglect either your business or your families by taking part in politics.

The mere suggestion of such a procedure is so absurd as to seem out of place in a serious article. Yet the burden of proving that women can over-qualify in precisely such fashion is constantly placed upon suffragists by our press, our statesmen and many men known as serious thinkers along other lines.

It seems to me very unfortunate that we suffragists should ever permit ourselves thus to over-qualify for the vote, which is exactly what we do when we prove or attempt to prove our fitness for the ballot, and our need of it, on any other ground than that of mere citizenship. We should say: The reason men are enfranchised is that, as citizens, they have a stake in the government. The reason women should be enfranchised is because, as citizens, they have a stake in the government. That is all there is to this question of woman suffrage.

But I admit that the temptation to over-qualify is very great because we know so much of the hardships and the ignominy which women have always suffered, and are still suffering, by reason of their political subjection; because we know of so many evils which we want to remedy—evils which affect all of society, as well as women alone; because we know so many fine women who are greatly handicapped in their work by their lack of power; because we are convinced that the world would be a much better and happier place if men and women could work on equal terms; because we know of the splendid results which can already be traced to the enfranchisement of women.

Yet such knowledge constitutes after all merely an added incentive for unlimited determination and ceaseless work. It is the inspiration which makes us force the reason for our enfranchisement to public attention; but it is not in itself the reason.

To illustrate: Many women feel that the greatest good they can do with the ballot is to abolish commercialized vice, to prevent child labor, or to make effective their protest against war. This is perhaps true. We all agree that these evils must be abolished, and that women, unenfranchised, have not and will not be able to abolish them. But the evils themselves and the desire of women to right them do not constitute the reason women should be enfranchised. The reason would remain even though all the evils I have named, or could name, should be abolished at once. We and the women who come after us should have our political power to use in any way we think best. We cannot tell what it will be necessary to do; what women will want to do. All we know is that women must have power to take their part in the government of their country and that the only honest, dignified, legitimate kind of political power is that which is derived from the elective franchise.

There seems to be no difficulty in proving the justice and logic of equal suffrage to anyone willing and able to think clearly about it. The chief trouble lies in persuading people really to think about it at all. Many women, it must be admitted, do not appreciate the value of a vote. But men have not the same excuse. They understand perfectly the power which the franchise gives, though they themselves do not make the most of it, and they believe in the principles of democracy. The difficulty lies in making them apply these principles to women.

It is indeed fearful and humiliating to belong to a class of people men can forget when speaking of fundamental privileges, but it is even more unfortunate to belong to a class of people men can forget without knowing they are forgetting anything. That is the position of women today. That is the only explanation of the attitude of the President of the United States, whose writings on democracy contain, perhaps, the best arguments ever made in favor of equal suffrage. The only trouble is that the President was not thinking of women when he made these arguments and, therefore, did not apply his conclusions to women as well as to men. There are many men who, like the President, think of us women merely as the wives, sisters and daughters of men, and in their thought of legislation they do not separate us from themselves and their interests. So they say of us in governmental affairs just as they say of us in the family life: "We take care of you; we look after your interests; your interests

are safe in our hands." And, consequently, instead of opposing woman suffrage because of sex antagonism, as is sometimes claimed, they really oppose woman suffrage on the ground of sex guardianship.

And that is where we women have lost all along, not by the antagonism of men, but by the guardianship of men. The idea that we are under tutelage, that we are taken care of, that a woman who works 16 hours a day is supported, is responsible for the conviction that women contribute nothing to the country's wealth, that they have done nothing toward the upbuilding of the nation, and are, therefore, not entitled to an opinion on the nation's problems.

If men would divest themselves for one moment of the thought that women are related to them and other men, if they would think of women as they think of each other, as distinct human beings, with all the rights and privileges and desires and hopes and aspirations of human beings, then I doubt very much whether any man fundamentally sound and logical in his attitude toward great moral and political questions could ever again utter a democratic principle without recognizing its application to the womanhood of the nation.